

sometimes a family is by aethelreds

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Gen, Multi

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Erica Sinclair, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-05

Updated: 2017-12-11

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:20:42

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 15

Words: 13,695

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Just some domestic fluff with only the vaguest inclination of a plot.

1. The Talk

Author's Note:

So this is the first time in possibly a decade that I've posted chapters as I write them and I'm excited?? This is also my first time posting a fic for Stranger Things so that's even more exciting!

This is just going to be pure episodic fluff. Lots of Byers and Hopper family cuteness and eventual Hopper x Joyce. I have no idea how long this fic will be or if it'll ever reach a state of completion but I hope you enjoy whatever you decide to read of it <3

"Listen, Miz Gillespie," Hopper sighed. "I can't do anything about owls who find your hair...nestable."

"This is the *second* time I've been assaulted by one of these creatures!" Eleanor Gillespie shrieked.

"Look, I'll talk to animal control about relocating the owl," Hopper said. And by that, he meant he was going to call up Ed Luwins from animal control, have a good chuckle with him about Eleanor Gillespie's hair, and leave it at that. "But might I suggest wearing a hat or changing your hairdo in the meantime? So that owls stop...nesting in your hair?"

Eleanor Gillespie's face contorted with rage. "It's *your* job to keep this town safe!"

"And I am," he said, rubbing his face. "I'm gonna talk to animal control and write up a report and let you know if anything develops, okay?"

Eleanor shouted a string of curses at Hopper as he climbed into his truck. He would write a report, all right--and Eleanor could shove it where the sun didn't shine.

He heard the radio before he'd even put the truck into gear. Three

long dashes, three short dashes, three long dashes. He'd know that anywhere--SOS. El was radioing the distress signal. Hopper threw the truck into gear and took off for his cabin, raising a trail of dust behind him. He reached the cabin in record timing, tearing through the woods and leaping over the tripwire. He knocked their special knock on the door; as soon as he heard the locks click, he threw himself into the cabin. "El!"

She was sitting by the radio, looking anguished. "Blood."

"What?" He looked around wildly. "Blood? Where?"

She pointed to her stomach. No, it was lower than her stomach...

Hopper shut his eyes. "It came from...between your legs?"

El nodded.

Hopper rubbed his face. "Okay. That's...that's normal."

El frowned.

This was not how Hopper had expected to spend his day. He knew girls got periods, and he knew El was a girl, but he'd never thought of El having a period. He wasn't prepared for this. He wasn't even *qualified* for this--he'd never had a period before. What was he supposed to tell her? "Women get periods once a month and that's all I really know, maybe if I buy a box of Tampax you can figure it out?"

"When you get to a certain age," he tried, "You...women...girls...have these things called. Periods. And you. Um. You know what, I can't do this. Nothing's wrong with you," he added quickly. "It's normal. But I think you need another...female...person...to explain what's um. What's going on."

There was only one female person who Hopper could trust with this.

.

Joyce came to the cabin carrying two plastic bags full of tampons, pads, and Ibuprofen. Hopper went back to the sheriff's office, called Ed Luwins from animal control about Eleanor Gillespie, went to the

Bundy farm to investigate a report of three stolen chickens, and picked up some groceries before he returned to the cabin. By the time he came back, El and Joyce were sitting at the kitchen table and giggling about something.

"Hi," Hopper said tentatively, setting down the groceries. "Is everything...?"

"Everything's just fine," Joyce said. "Right, El?"

El nodded.

Hopper jerked his head at the back room. "Go watch TV for a bit."

El was fine with this, going into the back room and closing the door. A moment later Hopper heard the TV blaring. He began unloading groceries. "So...what did you tell her?"

"You mean, did I give her the sex talk?" Joyce leaned against the counter.

"Well...yes."

"She...understands the basics," she said. "I'm sure she'll figure out the rest."

Hopper nodded. It wasn't like he was planning on talking about sex with El anytime soon anyway--he just wanted to know how much she knew so he could be prepared. "Can I ask what had you two giggling?"

Joyce gave him a mischievous look. "No, you may not."

He shrugged. "Fair enough."

He and Joyce chatted for a few more minutes, and then he walked her out to her car.

"Thanks again for doing this," he said as she opened the car door.

"It was no problem." She dropped her purse in the passenger seat. "I never thought I'd be having The Talk with a girl, you know? I never

even had The Talk with my boys. Lonnie talked to Jonathan and I know Will would rather talk to his brother than to me about that kind of stuff.”

“Don’t they have, uh, classes for that now? In schools?” Hopper asked.

Joyce rolled her eyes. “You know this town, Hop--do you really think kids are gonna learn anything in those classes?”

“I think they’ll learn a whole lot of ‘waiting until marriage’ bullshit.”

“Exactly.” Joyce closed her car door and waved to Hopper. He waved back, watching her Pinto pull away and trundle back down the road to town. When he couldn’t see the green Pinto anymore, he walked back to the cabin. El was watching TV, but she came out when she heard him starting dinner.

“I like Joyce,” she said.

“Yeah, she’s...pretty neat,” he said.

“Can she come over more?”

Hopper considered the question. “Sure. Why not?”

El smiled. Hopper smiled back.

2. Tutoring

Joyce did come over more. Usually it was for necessity runs, bringing El feminine protection and bras and things that would have looked strange for a grown man like Hopper to buy. Sometimes she brought Will with her, and he and El would play in the back room while Joyce and Hopper drank coffee and smoked cigarettes in the main room. Sometimes Joyce brought Will *and* Mike, and Hopper always had mixed feelings about that. Ultimately, he was glad that Mike and El were so close, because they clearly meant a lot to each other and seeing him made El happy. With that being said, he personally felt that thirteen was way too young to be as in love as they were. Mike was protective of El, too, almost to the point where it felt like he thought he was better at protecting her than Hopper was.

“They’re just kids,” Joyce said. “You were just as cocksure when you were that age.”

“I was a little shit,” Hopper grumbled.

“You’re still a little shit.”

“No, now I’m a giant piece of shit,” he corrected. “But I was only a little shit back then.”

Joyce laughed. “You are a giant piece of shit,” she said fondly. “But we love you anyway.”

“Thanks.” Hopper got up to pour them both more coffee.

“So, El’s gonna start school in the fall?”

“That’s the plan.” He set her mug down in front of her.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “She’s a smart kid, she knows how to read and write and count, but I don’t know if she’s ready for...algebra and chemistry.”

“Just get the boys to catch her up,” Joyce suggested. “They’re all

smart kids, and I bet they could get some workbooks from Mr. Clark.”

Hopper considered this. “Maybe...”

“Nancy’s smart, too--she’s tutoring Jonathan now. Between her and the boys, El could get caught up by the time school starts in the fall.”

Hopper liked that idea. Not because he thought the boys weren’t smart or capable of tutoring El, but because he knew how easily distracted they were. Nancy was at least focused.

So once a week, Jonathan would drive Nancy to the cabin and they’d go over workbooks with El. Sometimes they brought along the boys, who would go over what they were learning in school--but usually they ended up being escorted outside by Jonathan after Nancy sternly asked them to keep it down. Nancy started assigning homework, too, which El took to greedily. She went through workbook after workbook, read dozens of battered old paperbacks that the other kids had read in school, covered pages and pages with equations. She loved learning, and Hopper was absurdly proud of the fact.

Hopper offered to pay Nancy for her services, but she refused, insisting that she was happy to help. So he made dinner for her and Jonathan and the boys instead, and reimbursed Jonathan for gas.

Hopper made a point of trying to keep up with El’s lessons, and he was amazed to discover how much he didn’t remember from high school.

“Didn’t you learn this?” El asked him one day while they were poring over an algebra textbook.

Hopper shook his head. “I probably did, but...I wasn’t a very good student. I...didn’t go to class a lot,” he confessed.

She frowned. “Why not?”

He shifted. “I uh. It’s not important.”

El raised her eyebrows.

“I was a dumb kid,” he said. “And I was miserable all the time. I felt

like people didn't understand me." He cleared his throat. "I didn't have a lot of friends." Just one, really. "But you'll have Mike and Will and Dustin and Lucas and Nancy and Jonathan," he added quickly. "Don't...don't cut class."

"I won't," she said. "I'm not a mouthbreather."

Hopper stared at her for a moment and then burst into laughter. "No, you're definitely not," he agreed.

3. The Babysitter

And now, for a brief interlude.

The Sinclairs didn't often rely on babysitters, especially babysitters that were teenage boys--but when Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair were at a very important office party that would determine whether or not Mr. Sinclair got a promotion and Lucas was doing a campaign that he absolutely, positively could *not* miss, they decided to give Steve Harrington a chance. Ms. Henderson, Joyce Byers, and Karen Wheeler all sang his praises, and if he could handle all of the boys, Mrs. Sinclair figured he could handle Erica.

She figured wrong.

"Erica," Steve called from the bathroom. "Please give me back my pants."

"Nuh-uh! If you want them back, you have to let me stay up for a whole 'nother hour and eat as much ice cream as I want!"

"Erica, your parents will *not* be happy if they find out you stayed up late eating ice cream."

"My parents won't know," her bossy voice said from the other side of the door. "Because you're not going to tell them."

Steve was definitely not going to tell the Sinclairs, because he prided himself on being a good babysitter, and letting a nine-year-old girl hold his pants hostage in exchange for breaking the rules was not good babysitter behavior. Plus Lucas would find out, and then he'd tell his friends, and then everyone would make fun of Steve. And, well, he just couldn't allow that.

"Okay," he said at last. "If you promise not to tell your parents or *anyone else* ...you can stay up late and eat ice cream."

"That's right I can!" Erica unceremoniously threw open the door and tossed Steve's pants back at him. He still couldn't believe that the

little girl had laid such a cunning trap for him. He had new respect for Lucas, who probably had his pants stolen and was blackmailed all the time.

Steve plunked Erica in front of the TV and gave her a heaping bowl of ice cream with chocolate syrup and sprinkles. She devoured it greedily, chocolate syrup sticking to her mouth as she laughed at the movie she was watching.

“Okay, Erica,” Steve said when the movie was over. “Time for bed.”

She gave him a wilting look, and Steve realized with a sinking feeling that she had no intention of going to bed. “I’m not going to bed.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, you are.”

“Nuh-uh. I’m staying up another hour and eating more ice cream.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes I am.”

“No you’re *not* .”

“Yes I *am* .”

“How about this,” he said. “How about you just brush your teeth and then we’ll talk about it.”

She eyed him with suspicion. “Okay...I’ll brush my teeth.”

To Steve’s delighted amazement, she did just that, walking leisurely up the stairs. When she reappeared a few minutes later, the chocolate syrup was gone from her mouth and her breath smelled like bubblegum mint. “Okay, Harrington,” she said. “We can talk now.”

They sat on the couch, facing each other.

“You like having a babysitter, right?” he ventured. “You get to stay up late and eat ice cream and torture me.”

“That’s true,” she agreed.

"Well, if you're tired tomorrow, your parents will know that you stayed up late," he countered. "And if you wake up in the middle of the night with a tummy ache, they'll know you ate more food than you were supposed to."

Erica folded her arms over her chest. "You make a good point."

Steve held up a finger. "But if you go to bed now and don't eat anymore ice cream, then you won't wake up with any tummy aches and you won't be tired tomorrow. Ergo, your parents will never know about tonight's shenanigans, ergo, I can come over again and you can torture me all over again."

Erica stroked her chin. "I underestimated you, Harrington. You're a smart man."

"So, do we have a deal? You go to bed, act like a perfect little angel, tell your parents tomorrow that you had so much fun, Steve is the best babysitter ever, yadda yadda?"

She waved a dismissive hand. "I'll make it believable, don't worry about that. Okay. We have a deal." She shook Steve's hand. "But first," she said, not letting go of his hand just yet, "You have to read me a bedtime story."

This was a very reasonable request, so they went up to Erica's room. Erica got under the covers and Steve sat in the chair by her bed and started to read a book called *The Silmarillion*. It was one of Lucas's books, but Erica said she liked it, and Steve figured there wasn't any harm in it. What he didn't know was how *boring* the book was. Steve couldn't pronounce any of the names and he had no idea what was going on, and before long Erica was fast asleep. Steve felt his own head drop back against the chair, and in a moment he, too, was fast asleep.

As soon as she heard his snores, Erica sat up and threw back the covers. She waved a hand in Steve's face, and when he didn't react, she tiptoed out of the room. "Sucker," she whispered, and then pranced down the stairs.

When the Sinclairs came home an hour later, it was to find Erica

watching TV and eating another heaping bowl of ice cream. Steve woke up when Mr. Sinclair shook him gently.

"Don't worry," the older man sighed. "She does this a lot. You got off easy--we found the last babysitter tied up with jump rope."

Steve's eyes widened.

Erica waved at him as he walked out to his car, a generous wad of cash from the Sinclairs tucked in his pocket. "Bye, Steve."

He pointed two fingers at his eyes and then pointed them at her. She would pay.

4. the parent trap

Will and El were painting each other's toenails and watching *Mork and Mindy* while Hopper and Joyce chatted in the next room. It had been happening more and more frequently these days, and everyone was fine with the arrangement.

"Did you ever know your parents?" Will asked suddenly.

El glanced up at him. "Sort of." She was quiet for a minute. "I didn't know I had a mama until. Until the Mind Flayer came. They took her mind. I met her once." She was quiet for another minute. "I don't know if I have a father. I had...a papa. He was one of the bad men."

"My dad isn't very nice either," Will said kindly. "He's always been mean to me and Jonathan."

"Mouthbreather," El said, and Will smiled.

"Yeah. A mouthbreather."

They were quiet for a long moment, absorbed in the nail polish.

"I wish the chief was my dad," burst out Will. "He's so much nicer than my dad, and he's fun, and he cares about me. And he makes my mom happy."

"I wish Joyce was my mom," Eleven agreed.

They looked at each other. Something clicked.

"If your dad married my mom," Will said slowly. "Then we'd be brother and sister."

"We'd live in the same house," she said.

"We'd see each other all the time!"

"Your mom would make my dad happy, and he would make her happy."

They grinned at each other.

“We have to get our parents together,” Will said decisively.

“But how do we do that?”

Will tapped his fingers against his chin. “In *The Parent Trap*, they switch places, but I don’t think that would work with us.”

El frowned. “*The Parent Trap*?”

“It’s a movie,” he explained. “Where these two girls are identical twin sisters, but when they were babies their parents divorced and each parent took a twin and never told them. But then one summer they meet at camp and put it together, and they switch places so that their parents will have to unswitch them and fall back in love. Of course, they were identical twin girls, and the dad was gonna get married to a horrible woman, and they had to break up the engagement on a camping trip, but it all worked out in the end.”

El absorbed this. “Where would we find a horrible woman?”

“I don’t know,” Will admitted. “But...maybe we don’t need to find a real woman.”

El furrowed her brow.

“I have an idea.”

.

Joyce was smiling on the car ride home. “Did you have a good time today, sweetie?”

“Yeah, I had a really good time.” Will stared down at his lap. “Will we keep visiting when Hopper marries his girlfriend?”

“His what?” Joyce exclaimed. “Did you say his *girlfriend*? ”

“El said Hopper has a girlfriend,” Will explained. “I guess it’s kind of serious.” He stole a glance at his mother. Her knuckles were gripping the steering wheel so hard that they were white, and her lips were a

small, thin line on her face.

Will turned to look out the window and grinned.

“Who is this girlfriend?” Joyce asked Will in the middle of dinner.

“You have a girlfriend?” Jonathan gaped.

“Hopper does,” Will said, giving his brother a Look.

Jonathan chewed his food. “Okay.”

“Who *is* she?” Joyce wanted to know. “Who in this town would date *Hopper*?”

“I heard he used to go out with the librarian at the Hawkins Public Library,” Jonathan said.

“Everyone knows that,” Joyce snapped. “But they’re not *still* dating.” She paused. “Are they?”

Will shrugged. “I don’t know.”

Joyce spent the rest of the evening fuming. Will chalked it up as a success.

While Joyce was fuming about Hopper’s nonexistent girlfriend, Will and El were trying to convince Hopper to take them camping. He was very opposed to the idea at first, for obvious reasons, but with time, patience, and shameless pity-plays (“I just want to feel normal,” El had said. “My dad always said he would take me camping...but he never did,” Will had sighed.), they were able to wear him down.

“Fine,” he said at last. “But it has to be *incredibly* quiet, you hear me? El is still supposed to be in hiding.”

So, they had Hopper’s permission--now they just needed Joyce’s.

“Absolutely not,” Joyce said when Will asked her. “After everything

that's happened?"

"Mom, the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer are gone!" he protested.

"I don't care, I'm not risking you going out there with just Hopper and El."

"Hopper wouldn't let anything bad happen to me."

"I just wouldn't feel comfortable," Joyce said.

Will pretended to think about it. "What if you came with us?" When he saw Joyce's thoughtful pause, he hurried on, "That way you can keep an eye on me."

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I'm not...I haven't gone on many camping trips."

"Neither have I," he pointed out.

She chewed her lip. "Well...Hopper hasn't even invited me."

"So? You're my mom."

She kept chewing her lip. "What about...his girlfriend...?"

Will shrugged. "He never said anything about his girlfriend. He made it sound like it'd just be the three of us."

Joyce's face cleared. "Oh. Well...sure. Yeah. I'll talk to Hopper."

So, Hopper, Joyce, Will, and El went on a camping trip. Jonathan had offered to come, but Will had begged him not to.

"El and I are working on something," he'd said. "Just...trust me. It has to be the four of us."

Bemused, Jonathan had only shrugged and given Will his blessing.

Joyce and Will drove to Hopper's cabin on Saturday morning; the four of them hiked deeper into the woods until they reached the place Hopper's grandfather used to take him camping. Joyce was guarded at first, but as the day wore on she gave up and started

having a good time. Hopper kept holding out a hand to help her over fallen branches and small streams while the kids purposefully hopped on ahead; whenever Will looked back, it was to see his mom and Hopper smiling at each other.

Hopper showed the kids how to pitch the tents, and after they all dug into the sandwiches Joyce had made, they took off their boots and socks, rolled up their jeans, and waded into the water. El was afraid to go, considering all of her previous experiences with large bodies of water, so Joyce and Hopper held her hands and waded into the water with her. They only went knee-deep, and after a few minutes El was able to let go of their hands and slosh happily through the water with Will. Joyce and Hopper sat on the bank, their feet in the water while they watched the kids and chatted.

“Hey Mom!” Will called out. “Why don’t you come in?”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Joyce said. “I’m fine over here.”

“Aww, Mom, come on!”

“Oh, you want your mom to come in the water?” Hopper suddenly grabbed Joyce and swung her up in the air, bridal style.

“Hop!” she screamed, kicking her legs. Still, Will couldn’t help noticing that she was laughing. “What are you doing?!”

“Putting you in the water.”

“Don’t you *dare* --”

But Hopper was already carrying her out to the deeper part of the creek, so deep it was up to his waist, and he lightly dropped Joyce into the water. She emerged, spluttering. “You asshole!”

“Hey, language,” he said, but he was grinning.

“A little help here!”

Hopper helped her to her feet, but El had a different idea of help. She waited until Joyce was steady on her feet before she wiggled her fingers, and Hopper’s feet fell out from under him. He fell with a

crash, shouting and cursing as he landed in the water. All three of them were laughing at him, and in retaliation, Hopper grabbed Joyce and tugged her into the water with him. Will splashed forward, plopping down beside his mother. El, in a fit of bravado, splashed forward as well. She threw her arms around Hopper's shoulders, hanging on to his sturdy form so that she did not have to float in the water. They were all laughing and splashing each other, and El was so happy that her heart ached. She really, really hoped Will's plan would work.

They spent most of the afternoon playing in the creek, and when the sun began to descend and the water grew a little cooler, they trudged back to the campsite. They changed into dry clothes in their respective tents, and then Hopper and El built a campfire. By the time the sun had started to set, Hopper was roasting the hotdogs he'd packed on a spit, and Joyce was putting them in buns and handing them to the kids on paper plates. They were like a team, El thought, and again hoped that Will's plan would work.

After hotdogs came s'mores, which El had never eaten before, but she soon found that she loved the sticky, sweet mess. Her face and hands were covered in melted marshmallow by the end, and Joyce, laughing, wiped her clean with some wet wipes she had thoughtfully packed.

Somehow Hopper and Joyce started talking about when they were in high school. Will was delighted to find out what a troublemaker his mom had been.

"But, listen, don't...don't follow my example," Joyce said quickly, as if just now remembering that two impressionable children were listening to her. "I was dumb. We were dumb kids."

"We're not stupid," El volunteered. Hopper ruffled her hair.

"I didn't know you two were so close in high school," Will said. He really didn't--he'd known they were friends, but not that they'd been joined at the hip.

"She was my best friend," Hopper said bluntly.

"That's 'cause you didn't have any other friends," Joyce said--and maybe it was just the fire, but Will could've sworn there was a flush on her cheeks.

"Sorry, Jupiter Joyce, did you say something?"

"Jupiter Joyce?" El echoed.

"God, it was this stupid nickname," Joyce groaned. "'Cause I have...big eyes, I guess, and I was always spacing out, and people spread rumors I was a space alien, so they called me Jupiter Joyce. Obviously, I didn't have a lot of friends either."

"It was just the two of us," Hopper said, looking at her with fondness.

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "The two weirdos."

"So...what happened?" Will prodded. "How did you go from best friends to...whatever you were when you moved back to Hawkins?"

The adults glanced at each other.

"Lonnie Byers is what happened," Hopper said gruffly.

Joyce's cheeks really were flushed now.

"I don't understand," Will said.

"Your dad stole your mom from me," Hopper said.

Will and El's mouths fell open.

"You were... *together* ?!"

"Yes," Joyce said, blushing furiously by now.

"You left Hopper for *Dad* ?!"

"I told you, I was a dumb kid." Joyce was intentionally *not* looking at Hopper. "It is what it is."

"We had a fight," Hopper said suddenly. "You were trying to make me jealous."

“It didn’t work.”

“It did,” he said. “I was...also a dumb kid.”

Will and El could hardly believe what they were hearing. It was almost like they were intruding on a private moment, eavesdropping on something that wasn’t meant to be heard--except they were sitting out in the open.

“How the fuck did we get started on this?” Joyce asked, breaking the spell. “Who wants some wine?”

She had, unbeknownst to Will, packed a bottle of red wine, which she poured in Solo cups for her and the kids--just a little bit, of course, since they were only fourteen and had never had alcohol before. Hopper pulled one of the cans of Schlitz from the six-pack he’d put in the cooler and drank that. He let El have a taste, but she spit it out almost as soon as she tried it.

The kids were tipsy before long, giggling and generally feeling rather silly. It took little urging to get them to lie down in one of the tents; Joyce packed them in sleeping bags and kissed their heads before crawling back out of the tent and zipping it up. Will and El were still awake, though, and they heard Hopper say, “I can’t believe you got the kids drunk.”

“They’re not drunk, just...a little woozy.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Shut up.”

“Well, what do you say we get a little woozy and go skinny-dipping?”

“*Hop* , the *kids* --”

“Are in a drunk coma, thanks to you.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

It was silent for a long moment, and Will and El rolled over in their sleeping bags to peer out the screen of the tent. Joyce and Hopper

were sitting on the same log, their backs to the tent. Joyce's head was on Hopper's shoulder and his cheek was resting on her head, his arm around her shoulders. They looked...cozy.

Will and El grinned at each other.

5. sister, sister

Notes for the Chapter:

I just wanna say upfront that I have no idea if telepathy is possible between El and Kali and I don't really care, just...suspend your disbelief for this chapter, okay?

This chapter also kiiiiind of ties in to my Steve x Kali fic "don't stop believin'", but you totally don't have to read that to appreciate this chapter.

Thanks for all the lovely comments!!

Hopper woke up in the middle of the night to find El standing over his bed. He cursed in surprise, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “Jesus, kid, you scared the shit out of me. What’s up?”

“Sister’s coming.”

He frowned. “What?”

“My sister. Kali. Number eight. She’s coming here.”

Hopper was wide awake now. “What do you mean, she’s coming here?”

“She found me the way I found her,” El said patiently. “She’s worried about me.”

“Oh, Christ.” Hopper rubbed his tired eyes. “She’s, what, trying to take you away?”

“I told her that I’m safe here. That I’m happy. She just wants to make sure.”

Hopper considered this. He wasn’t jazzed at the idea of El’s criminal “sister” coming to visit--El had told him about Kali and the brief time they’d spent together, and Hopper had a strong feeling that he wouldn’t get along with the other teenager. But he could understand

that, if their bond was as strong as El said, Kali would be worried about the girl who ran out on her months before and wanted to make sure she was all right.

“Okay,” he said at last. “When’s she getting here?”

“In the morning. She’s getting a bus from Chicago now.”

Hopper tried to do the mental math. It would be about five or six hours before she’d get here, which meant he could get a few more hours of sleep before driving down to the bus depot. “Okay. You know you still can’t leave.”

“I know,” she said, deflating.

“Can you...can you tell her I’ll pick her up?”

She nodded.

He rubbed his eyes. “How will I know...?”

“You’ll know,” El said with certainty.

She was right--as soon as Kali stepped off the bus, Hopper knew who she was. She wore a long black jacket, ripped black jeans, and black combat boots. Her hair was edged in purple and shaved on one side, and over her shoulder she carried a lumpy duffel bag. She looked like an MTV punk.

Hopper felt very foolish as he raised a hand and waved.

Kali sauntered over to him, her combat boots thudding on the ground. It was a good thing it was so early in the morning, before most of Hawkins was out and about--otherwise there would be even more gossip around Hopper than there usually was. She popped her bubblegum. “So. You must be Jane’s policeman.”

.

Kali’s presence changed everything. She and El were attached at the hip, their heads constantly dipped in conference. Hopper had no idea what they talked about, either, because every time Kali detected him

listening, the two girls would go quiet and look at him until he left them alone. It made him uneasy to leave them at home alone all day, but nothing seemed out of place and there wasn't any indication that they left the cabin while he was gone, so he forced himself to relax. Kali cared about El, and El understood the situation--they weren't going to do anything stupid.

That didn't mean that Hopper liked Kali. He was trying, he really was, but the kid was an anti-establishment punk who had killed men for following orders, and it was clear that the only reason she was even coldly polite to Hopper was because of El. She was messy and she ignored him and she occupied all of El's attention. It didn't help, either, that El's friends were totally fascinated by her. He got it, she was... *exotic* to kids like them. Even if she didn't have purple hair and tattoos on her ears (seriously, her *ears*), she was El's sister. Of course the kids were fascinated. It just irritated the living crap out of Hopper. Everything was *Kali this, Kali that* , and *oh hey Hopper didn't see you there and what do you mean you aren't feeding all of us and Kali is soooo cool, isn't she?*

So it came as something of a relief when Nancy and Jonathan invited Kali out one night. She didn't seem thrilled at the prospect, and for once, Hopper could sympathize; he, too, had lived in a major city before coming back to Hawkins, he was well aware of the paltry entertainments the small town offered. Still, Kali accepted the invitation, and on Friday night Nancy and Jonathan picked her up and ferried her out into the night.

And just like that, Hopper felt like he could breathe again. No Kali, no kids, just him and El. The way it used to be.

They settled in on the couch and watched TV. *The Wizard of Oz* was playing, and El was transfixed by the movie. Hopper was nearly falling asleep, but he was so excited to finally have some time with El that he forced himself to stay awake. During one of the commercial breaks, when he was contemplating making a cup of coffee, El turned down the volume with a jerk of her head and turned to Hopper.

"I'm sorry you don't like Kali."

He didn't know what to say. "O-oh...I...I don't..."

"It's okay," she said. "I know you don't. She doesn't like you very much either."

He rolled his eyes. "Great."

She reached over, took his hand. "She won't be here much longer," she said in that solemn little way of hers. "She doesn't like this place."

"Yeah, I kinda figured."

El's eyes were wide and unrelenting. "She trusts you."

Hopper blinked. "Oh. Uh..."

"She didn't think she would. She wanted to take me back to Chicago. But she said I'm better off here with you."

For some reason, Hopper felt touched. Maybe it was because he knew how much Kali disliked him and how hesitant she was to trust anyone...but she trusted him with her little sister anyway.

"That's...that's really nice of her," he said, because he wasn't sure what else to say. "Hey, maybe we can...go visit her in Chicago sometime, huh?"

"You'd hate that."

"I would," he agreed. "But she's your family, too."

El beamed at him. And then the commercial break ended and she became transfixed by *The Wizard of Oz* once more.

.

Hopper drove Kali to the bus station a few days later. There'd been an uncharacteristic wetness in her eyes when she'd left El, and every now and then Hopper heard a muffled sniff from the passenger's seat. He cleared his throat.

"I, uh...I just wanted to say that...it really meant a lot to El that you came to see her. And...that you put up with me even though you

don't like pigs."

Kali's lips curled into a smile. "You're not like most cops I know."

"Probably not."

She turned to look at him. "I didn't think anyone was capable of caring for my sister the way she needs. I had...something like a family once. People who cared for me. But in the end, they couldn't protect me." She glanced down at her lap. "If anyone can protect Jane, it's you."

Hopper felt a swell of pride. "You know, you're welcome anytime."

"Thank you." She hesitated. "And you..."

"We can figure something out," he said.

Kali smiled again. "You're all right, Hopper."

"Yeah, that's what they tell me."

They didn't hug or even shake hands when they parted; Kali simply gave him a two-fingered salute and sauntered towards the bus. Hopper may not have liked Kali, but she was El's sister, and that made her family.

6. totally tubular

Even though she was still in hiding, El was so happy when school ended because it meant she could spend all day with her friends. Mike, Will, Dustin, and Lucas would come over almost every day, either altogether or in various combinations, and watch TV with her and read comic books with her and generally just keep her company. Sometimes Jonathan and Nancy or Steve would come over, too, and that was always nice.

Max was starting to come over more and more now, too, and El was still trying to figure out how she felt about that. She knew now that Mike didn't like Max the same way he liked El--in fact, for a while, he hadn't liked Max at all. She knew that Max didn't pose a threat, and even if Max *did* like Mike in that way (and she didn't, Mike reassured her, because she was with Lucas), Mike wouldn't look at her twice.

So why did El feel so threatened by her? Max was nice, and she seemed to really want to be El's friend--but every time she was around, El found herself ignoring her, burrowing deeper in Mike's attention and pretending she didn't know Max was even in the room.

That was hard to do, though, when Max showed up by herself one day. Hopper was working and no one else had mentioned any plans to come by the cabin, so El had no choice but to finally acknowledge Max's presence.

"I know you don't like me," Max said bluntly, as soon as the door had opened.

El stared at her shoes.

"It's okay," Max said. "You don't know me. And you came back from not being allowed to see your friends and I was just. There. I get it."

El shifted.

"It's just. Those guys are my friends too. I see them every day. And when you come to school with us in a couple months, I'm going to see you every day, too. So, we might as well at least *try* to be

friends.” She paused. “Plus I think you’re really cool.”

El looked up and saw the honesty on Max’s face. “You do?”

Max smiled. “Duh. You’re totally...what’s the word you use? Bitchin’.”

Now El smiled. “Do you...want to come in?” she asked.

Max nodded. “Yeah.”

They sat on the floor and watched TV, but since it was daytime programming, the only decent thing they could watch were El’s soap operas. Max openly laughed at them, which confused El, because she thought they were so *serious*. That man was in a *coma*. But soon Max had stopped laughing and they were both watching the screen, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, gasping whenever a shocking new plot point was revealed. Around mid-afternoon, El put Eggos in the toaster, and Max asked if she could show her something. She pulled the vanilla ice cream out of the freezer and put a scoop of ice cream on each waffle.

El loved it. She made a second one and added chocolate syrup. It was *divine*, better even than the triple-decker Eggo-Extravaganza Hopper would sometimes make. She had a feeling Hopper would like this, too.

When the soaps were over, they put on music and used the crayons Will had given El to draw pictures. Max drew the ocean, which El had never seen before, and El drew parts of Chicago, which Max had never seen.

“Do you miss California?”

Max shrugged. “I miss my dad. I like it here, though. Well,” she amended. “I like you guys. You’re probably the coolest friends I’ve ever had.”

El smiled. “Are we...totally tubular?” She’d only ever heard Lucas say it, and while she didn’t know what it meant, she knew that it made Max laugh.

Max did laugh, and El felt pleased with herself. “Yeah, *totally* .”

“ *Totally* ,” El said, and they started giggling.

They were still giggling when they heard the secret knock on the door. El opened it with her powers, and Mike and Lucas came tumbling in.

“Max?” Lucas said in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Just visiting,” Max said with a shrug.

“We’re friends,” El said, smiling at the other girl.

Max beamed back. “Yeah. Friends.”

7. first day of school

Everyone was nervous about El's first week of school. While the original plan had been to wait a full year, the kids had pointed out that El would only draw more attention if she came in halfway through the school year, and it was better if she was just one of hundreds of new faces joining the freshman class of Hawkins High School in August. Dr. Owens saw the sense in this, and so, "Jane Hopper" started her freshman year alongside every other fourteen-year-old in Hawkins. Even though she'd be surrounded by her friends, Hopper was still worried that something bad would happen, like someone would recognize her or she'd get kidnapped. So he intentionally stayed in his office close to the phone all day, just in case something happened.

As it turned out, something *did* happen. Around the time El should have been in sixth period, he got a call from the principal.

"What happened?" he asked sharply.

"I really think you should come down here, Chief."

Hopper sighed and hung up.

School was just letting out by the time he got there. El was sitting in the principal's office, arms across her chest and a scowl on her face. Sitting in a chair that had been strategically placed several feet away was a boy who looked familiar to Hopper, but he just couldn't place *why*.

"Thank you for coming, Chief," the principal said smoothly. "Please, take a seat."

Hopper did. "What's this about?"

The principal took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Troy, why don't you tell the Chief what you told me?"

"It's her," the boy named Troy spat, and suddenly Hopper remembered him. "The girl who broke my arm and made me...you

know!” He pointed a dramatic finger at El. “She’s the one!”

El turned to look at Hopper, her eyes defiant.

Hopper turned back to Troy. “That’s impossible.”

Troy’s mouth fell open. “But she--”

“This is my daughter, Jane,” Hopper rumbled. “She just came to stay with me this summer. She couldn’t *possibly* be the same girl.”

Troy stood up. “*I know* it’s her!”

“The telekinetic girl you claimed attacked you two years ago?” Hopper asked in his most unimpressed voice. “Yeah. That sounds like Jane, all right.”

The principal looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry to waste your time, Chief Hopper—it’s clear to me now that Troy has...an active imagination.”

“*I know it’s her !*”

“That’s enough,” the principal said sharply. “Jane is free to go. I’m so sorry for interrupting your first day of school.”

El shrugged and followed Hopper out of the office. Troy was screaming as they left.

All of El’s friends were gathered in the hall outside, and they exploded in chatter as soon as the door had closed behind Hopper.

“Enough!” he barked. “Everything’s fine. She’s not in trouble, that kid is a bully who lied for attention. *Right ?*”

They heard the emphasis in his tone and nodded. “Right,” they echoed.

Hopper sighed. “Okay, who wants ice cream?”

“ME!”

8. conciliabule

El watched Will, Dustin, and Lucas tear away on their bikes (Max trailing behind on her skateboard) and felt a stinging in her eyes. They'd been acting weird all day, and when she'd asked Mike about it, he said they weren't acting weird—but he was clearly lying.

“Friends don’t lie,” she reminded him.

“I’m not lying!”

They almost fought about it, but El didn’t want to fight with Mike so she didn’t push the matter. Still. She knew that something was up. She wondered what was going on. Did they like Max better than her now? Was there room for only one girl in the group? Mike had told her that he hadn’t liked Max when he first met her and hadn’t wanted her in the group because there wasn’t a place for her. But Max had been going to school with the boys for a year now, and El was only just allowed to go to school with them after the months she’d spent hiding in Hopper’s cabin and changing TV channels with her mind. Maybe they didn’t want to be her friend anymore, not now that they were getting older.

“Ready?” Mike asked, already on his bike.

El nodded and climbed on her own bike. They went to Mike’s house, which felt strangely empty without any other teenagers. They tried to do some of their homework, but El was so miserable imagining what Will, Dustin, Lucas, and Max were doing without her that she couldn’t concentrate.

“You’re really upset about them, aren’t you?” Mike asked when she shoved her homework aside.

She gave a small nod, afraid they would almost fight again. But Mike gently laced his fingers with hers.

“Let’s go over to Will’s house.” When she furrowed her brow, he said, “It’ll make sense when you’re there, I promise. Let’s go.”

So they got on their bikes and rode to Will's house. It was dark by the time they got there, and El saw with a sinking heart that the Byers house was dark. No one was home. Will, Lucas, Dustin, and Max weren't there, and now El would have to go all the way back to Mike's house or to the police station to get a ride home—because there was no way Hopper was going to let her bike back to the cabin in the dark.

"Someone's gotta be here," Mike said, dropping his bike in the driveway.

"No one's here," she sighed, but Mike knocked on the door. "Will! Mrs. Byers! Jonathan!"

"Mike, stop," she said, but the door opened and someone El couldn't quite make out exchanged whispered words with Mike. He turned to her and beckoned her forward.

"Come on!"

Curious now, El dropped her own bike and walked up to the front door. It was still dark inside, and Mike took her hand and pulled her in. The lights came on all of a sudden and a group of people jumped out from behind furniture.

"SURPRISE!"

El started, grabbing Mike, but she soon saw that the room was full of her friends. Hopper, Will, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy, Steve, and even Kali and her gang were there, beaming at her.

"What...?"

"It's your birthday!" Joyce exclaimed.

"We threw you a surprise party," Mike said, smiling at her. "We knew you'd never had a real birthday before, and we all wanted to get together and let you know how special you are to us."

El felt her eyes stinging again, but for a very different reason. "Thank you," she said softly.

There was cake and music and presents, and most importantly, lots of hugging. By the time Hopper drove them home a few hours later, El's smile was so big that her face hurt.

"So?" he wheedled. "How was your first birthday?"

El's smile stretched even wider. "Bitchin'."

9. thick and thin

It wasn't that any of them *wanted* to go on a double-date, it was just that it was the most convenient way for the two couples to go on a date at all. Just because Mike and El spent a lot of time together didn't mean that Hopper was thrilled at the prospect of their going on an actual real-live date, and he felt marginally better if there was another couple there to chaperone. Max, on the other hand, was too afraid to tell her family about Lucas because she knew what her stepdad's reaction would be, so she framed it as hanging out with friends rather than going on a date with her secret boyfriend. The four teenagers were going to get a bite to eat at Brooklyn Pizza (a place which Hopper, who had actually eaten pizza in Brooklyn, detested) and then head over to the Hawk to see a movie.

Max was hesitantly optimistic. Even though she and El were friends now, Mike still didn't seem to like her very much, and she suspected that the only reason he even tolerated her was because of the others. But maybe their mutually beneficial arrangement would make them bond.

She was very, very wrong. When she found the other three sitting in the booth at Brooklyn Pizza, Mike was scowling, El was staring at her lap, and she knew that half of Lucas's excitement over her arrival was just because he was glad for the distraction from the dark cloud hanging over Mike.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Nothing," Mike said moodily.

Max blinked. "Uh. Okay." She glanced between El and Lucas, who were both studiously avoiding her gaze. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Mike bit out.

She folded her arms on top of her menu. "Really? So why are you so pissed off?"

"I'm not pissed off."

“You sure seem like it.” Max could feel herself pushing, could feel herself trying to get a rise. It was something she always struggled with and she knew it. She didn’t know when to stop.

“Are you gonna interrogate me all night or what?” Mike snapped.

“Come on, man,” Lucas said weakly.

Mike surprised them all by getting up.

“Mike,” El murmured, reaching for his arm, and he surprised them further by shrugging her off. Mike *never* shrugged off El. He seemed to realize it because his gaze softened by a fraction.

“I just need some fresh air,” he mumbled, stomping outside.

They were quiet for a moment.

“Are you okay?” Lucas finally asked El.

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “Fine,” she said quietly.

“What the hell is going on?” Max demanded.

Lucas and El glanced at each other.

“Mike’s parents are getting a divorce,” Lucas said.

El nodded. “They had a big fight right before Mike left. He’s really upset about it.”

Max flopped back against her seat. “Geeze.” It wasn’t exactly a secret that Ted and Karen Wheeler (well, mostly Karen) were unhappy, but divorce...well, Max knew firsthand how terrible that was. She glanced at her friends and realized that they, well, didn’t. Lucas’s parents loved each other, and while El had faced a whole host of unpleasantness, divorce did not factor into that equation. It occurred to Max that maybe Mike was so upset because he felt so lonely. She knew that Will and Dustin had both gone through their own parents’ divorces, but maybe Mike hadn’t really gotten a chance to talk to them about it--and anyway, they weren’t here right now. She stood up. “I’m gonna talk to him.”

“That’s a really terrible idea,” Lucas said honestly.

“I know what he’s going through,” Max said. “Just...give me a few minutes with him, okay?”

El nodded, which Max took as tacit approval. She sighed and followed Mike outside.

He was sitting on the curb, scowling at the puddle of condensation someone’s car had left. His scowl only deepened when he saw Max. “Come to ask me more questions?”

She sat down beside him. “They told me about your parents.”

Mike looked away. “Yeah, so?” he muttered.

“So, I know what it feels like when your mom and dad are screaming at each other and you can’t do anything about it,” she said softly.

Mike was quiet for a long minute. “I just,” he said, and Max realized he was crying. “I knew they didn’t...I knew they weren’t...I just thought that’s how marriage was supposed to be,” he said. “And when things got worse, I thought it would pass. I didn’t realize it would pass *this way*.”

“Yeah,” Max said, surprising herself with how gentle her voice sounded. “I thought it was my fault for a while. Because I goofed off so much. I thought they were frustrated because of me.”

Mike looked at her. “I thought it was because of me too,” he said. “I was...I was in a bad mood all the time the year El was hiding. They were always mad at me and I thought it was my fault.” He wiped his eyes. “Now I know they were mad at each other and I was just...”

“There.”

“Yeah. There.”

They sat in silence for a long moment.

“It’s rough,” she said at last. “I’m not gonna sugarcoat it. I spent so much time skating because it meant I didn’t have to be inside

listening to them. But you've got us," she said, tentatively resting a hand on his shoulder. "El, and Lucas, and Will and Dustin, and me. For what it's worth. And we're gonna be here for you through thick and thin."

Mike gave her a watery smile. "Thanks." He wiped his eyes again. "I'm sorry I was such an asshole."

She shrugged. "It's okay, you're going through a lot."

"No, I mean...I'm sorry I was an asshole even before," he said, and she understood his meaning. "I just...I had this stupid fear that the guys would like, want to replace El with you. Not that you aren't great," he added quickly. "It's just..."

"I get it," she said, and she did. "And I get that I'm not your favorite person, and that's okay. You're not mine either."

He snorted.

"It's gonna be okay," she said. "I promise."

He nodded. "Yeah." He stood up and held out a hand to help her up. "Thanks, Max."

She shrugged. "Anytime, loser. Now go tell El how much you love her or whatever you guys are always doing. She's really worried about you."

Mike's entire face changed. "Shit." He practically dashed back inside the pizza parlor, Max following at a leisurely pace. El and Lucas both looked up at their return.

"Mike," El began, but he flung himself into the seat beside her and pressed his forehead to hers.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

It was always a little embarrassing at how open they were with their affection, and Max and Lucas pointedly gave them their privacy while they pretended to read the menu.

“Everything okay?” Lucas asked.

Max smiled at him. “Yeah. Everything’s okay.” She hesitated, then pressed a soft, quick kiss to his cheek.

“God, PDA much?” Mike fake-scoffed from across the table. He had an arm around El, and her head was nestled against his shoulder.

“Gross,” El said, smiling.

“Yeah, sorry, I know how much you guys hate PDA,” Max said sarcastically. “So are we splitting a cheese pizza or what?”

Mike and El smiled at her, and she smiled back. A double-date *had* been a good idea.

10. pretty

The high school's homecoming dance was coming up, and El needed a dress. Nancy was more than happy to take the younger girl out on a shopping excursion—Nancy would also need a dress, and she wanted to spend time with El one-on-one.

It was nice. They went out to the mall, where all the department stores were showcasing their party dresses and giving discounts on shoes and purses. Nancy was eager to try on a bunch of them, but she made herself be patient—she knew she'd find something pretty. Right now, she needed to focus on *El* finding something pretty.

It wasn't easy to find a dress for the younger girl—Nancy remembered being fourteen, when her body was still too small and awkward and all the dresses she tried on made her look like a little girl playing dress-up. Most of the dresses El gravitated towards seemed to wear her instead of the other way around when she tried them on.

"Why don't any of them look...right?" El asked, troubled.

"Dress shopping is hard," Nancy said soothingly. "No one looks good in everything. Don't worry, it isn't just you." She rifled through the rack. "We'll find something, I promise."

El tilted her head. "Nancy?"

"Hmm?"

"How do you get to be so...pretty?"

Nancy turned to look at her. "Oh, honey," she said softly. "You *are* pretty." She tucked a curl behind El's ear. "You have such pretty dark hair, and such pretty brown eyes, and you have the biggest, brightest smile."

El did smile at that, ducking her head.

"You are absolutely one of the prettiest girls in school, and when you show up at that dance in a gorgeous dress and makeup, it won't just be my brother who can't stop staring at you."

El blushed.

Nancy guided her to another rack of dresses. “Come on—what jumps out to you?”

El furrowed her brow. “None of them...jump.”

“It’s a figure of speech. It means, which one do you notice right away? Which one can you just not take your eyes away from?”

El stared for a minute, and then impulsive reached for a **silvery confection**. “This one.”

It was a little flashy for Nancy’s taste, but this wasn’t Nancy’s taste—it was El’s. She smiled. “Let’s go try it on.”

It fit perfectly, and it looked fantastic on El. The younger girl couldn’t take her eyes off her reflection, twirling and posing.

“I take it you like it?”

“It’s pretty,” El breathed.

“Okay,” Nancy laughed. “You stay here—I’m gonna find a dress for me, okay?”

It didn’t take long for Nancy to find a red-and-black polka dot dress, and it took even less time for them to find shoes and clutches that would match their dresses. Before they left the store, Nancy bought some makeup that she promised she’d use on El for the dance.

“You know, this is really nice,” Nancy said as they went to the food court, where they planned to treat themselves to milkshakes. “Holly’s so much younger than me, I never thought I’d have a little sister to take dress shopping and just...hang out with.”

El smiled up at her. “Yeah. My sister gave me new clothes, but they were...different.”

Nancy vaguely remembered the punk makeover El’s mysterious sister had given her. She was sure it was very hip in Chicago, but El would have been kicked out of the dance if she tried to pull off that look in

little old Hawkins.

“Well, anytime you wanna go shopping for clothes, you know who to call.”

El beamed. “Thanks, Nancy.”

They got milkshakes and talked about clothes, and overall, it was really, really nice.

11. the secret: part one

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you guys so much for the kudos and comments! As you've probably noticed by now, this fic is a mishmash of fluff and doesn't have a specific direction, so if there's something you'd like to see, feel free to request it! You can also bother me on my tumblr, where I go by jeynehopper--I'm usually more active there than I am here. I am always, always, always accepting prompts there, so if you want to see something you're not sure would fit here, don't hesitate to ask!

It was Will's turn to take out the trash. He was carrying the kitchen trash outside when the bag ripped and trash spilled all over the floor. Groaning to himself, Will put on rubber gloves and tried to push the trash into a new bag. His hand grabbed something he hadn't seen before, but it didn't take him long to figure out what it was.

"Oh, gross , " he muttered, hurling it in the new bag. When he had disposed of the garbage and wiped the floor where it had spilled, he went to Jonathan's room to either yell at him or make fun of him. "I get you're like, super into your girlfriend, but could you *not* have sex in the kitchen?"

Jonathan frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Will smirked. "I found a used condom in the trash."

Jonathan's frown deepened. "I don't...throw my used condoms in the kitchen trash."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah...I only throw them out in my room and then I take the trash out myself so Mom doesn't see it."

The smirk slid off Will's face. "So...if it isn't yours...who...?"

Realization dawned on both of them.

“*Mom* ?!”

“Is she...having sex?” Will asked in horror.

“No,” Jonathan said at once. “I mean...we would know, wouldn’t we?”

“Yeah,” Will said quickly, but he didn’t sound too sure of himself.
“Well...maybe.”

“We knew about Bob,” Jonathan pointed out.

“Yeah,” Will agreed. “But maybe...maybe she doesn’t want us to know this time.”

“But why wouldn’t she want us to know?” Jonathan fretted.

“I don’t know,” Will sighed. “I really wanted her and Hopper to get married, but I guess that won’t be happening anymore.”

Jonathan wrinkled his nose. “*Hopper* ?”

“Yes,” Will said defensively. “I like him, and he makes Mom happy.”

Jonathan considered this. “Okay, well...maybe she just...had a one-night thing with someone, you know? Like...maybe she’s just...lonely?”

“Maybe,” Will said.

“And that would explain why she didn’t say anything,” Jonathan said, latching onto the theory. “It was just a one-time thing, so it doesn’t matter.”

Except, it *wasn’t* a one-time thing. When the boys came home from school a few days later, Joyce had a hickey on her neck.

“What the hell, Mom?” Jonathan yelped. “What are you, sixteen?!?”

“It’s just a bruise,” she lied, but she was a terrible liar.

“Mom!”

“IT’S A BRUISE, JUST DROP IT.”

But Jonathan and Will would *not* drop it. How could they? Their mom was *seeing* someone.

They decided to start spying on Joyce. Will remembered Joyce mentioning how Bob would visit her at work, so they started randomly surprising her at Melvald’s. The problem was that they never saw anyone who looked like a gentleman caller--the only person they ever saw regularly hanging around Melvald’s was Hopper, and they knew *he* wasn’t Joyce’s gentleman caller.

“Maybe we should ask him,” Jonathan suggested. “Since he spends so much time with Mom.”

But Will vehemently shook his head. “No. No . Hopper is in love with Mom; if he finds out she’s seeing someone else, he’ll be heartbroken.”

Jonathan made a face. “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Yes it is,” Will said in a final sort of tone. “We can’t ask Hopper.”

“But what if he *knows* ?”

“He doesn’t know,” Will huffed. “Remember when Mom started dating Bob and Hopper was in a bad mood all the time?”

“He has *always* been in a bad mood all the time. I’ve never seen him in a *good* mood.”

“We’re not asking Hopper! We just have to figure it out ourselves.”

They sat back to consider their options.

“Maybe...Mrs. Wheeler knows?” Jonathan suggested. “She and Mom are friends.”

Will perked up. “Yeah, maybe you’re right!”

They got Nancy in on it, because they knew Karen was much more

likely to disclose something to Nancy than either of the boys. Nancy agreed, and later reported back that her mother didn't know.

"What if she knows and she's just covering?" Jonathan asked.

"I don't think she is," Nancy said. "She's been in such a bad mood with the divorce going on, but she *lit up* when I asked if she knew anything about who your mom was seeing and she kept asking me for details. She wouldn't be that excited if she was hiding something."

"Okay," Will said. "So, let's try to use deductive reasoning. What are the facts?"

"We found a used condom in the kitchen."

"She had a hickey."

"He's *not* visiting her at Melvald's."

"Do we know that for sure?" Nancy prodded.

"Well, he could be, but he's definitely coming to the house," Jonathan said. "Otherwise Will wouldn't have found a condom in the kitchen. Plus Mom had a hickey on a day that she had off, and it wasn't there that morning." He paused. "So he's coming over when we're in school," he realized.

"Which means, if we want to find out who it is..."

"...we have to sneak back during school."

Nancy looked excited. "You're really gonna skip school to catch your mom's secret boyfriend?"

"I don't know," Jonathan said, suddenly abashed. "I mean...it's kind of an invasion of privacy..."

But Will had a steely glint in his eyes. "I had to see his used condom, Jonathan. His. Used. Condom. I want to catch that man."

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, okay, we're doing this."

So, on the following Monday, when Joyce had the day off, the boys showed up for their respective homerooms so that Joyce would not get a call about their being missing; between first and second period, however, Jonathan simply walked over to the middle school, told the principal that he had to take his brother to a doctor's appointment, and successfully got Will out of class. The two boys got in Jonathan's car and, with racing hearts, drove in the direction of home. They parked the car further down the road so that Joyce wouldn't see it and then walked through the woods.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jonathan asked as they neared the house.

Will nodded. "Yes. We have to know."

Jonathan sighed, bracing himself. "All right."

He and Will hid in the bushes beside the house. It wasn't the greatest coverage, but they figured that whoever was visiting wouldn't be looking too hard at the bushes. They sat there for nearly an hour before they heard tires moving over the gravel; moving to crouch behind the leaves, they watched as a truck pulled up in front of the house. *Hopper's* truck.

"Oh, that's not good," Will groaned. "Hopper's gonna be here when Mom's boyfriend shows up."

Jonathan was frowning. "Will..."

"We should lure him away," Will decided. "That way he won't run into Mom's boyfriend and get upset."

" *Will* ..."

But Will was already setting off for the house. Jonathan stumbled after him, cursing as he tried to stop his younger brother from making a terrible mistake.

But he was too late, because Will had already thrown open the front door and shouted, "MOM!"

Jonathan ran right into Will, who had stopped short on the threshold.

Joyce and Hopper were in the hall, caught in...well. A compromising situation. They stared at the boys and the boys stared back.

“What are you doing here?” Joyce asked, carefully disengaging herself from Hopper.

The boys looked down.

“Um...”

“Well...”

“About that...”

“We were trying to see who you were...you know...”

“Screwing,” Jonathan said bluntly. Will’s face was tomato-red.

Joyce’s face contorted. “You skipped *school* to see who I was *sleeping with?*”

“Well, when you put it *that way...*”

Hopper paced up and down the hall, rubbing his chin.

“You are both *grounded* ,” Joyce said, pointing a finger at them. “You need to go *right back* to school, do you hear me?”

“So you can fuck Hopper?”

“ *Jonathan !*”

“Hey!”

“Mom?”

“What?”

Will looked as if he was trying not to smile. “Are you guys...like...getting married?”

“GO TO SCHOOL.”

Jonathan scampered out the door, pulling Will behind him. They ran all the way back to Jonathan's car; it wasn't until Jonathan had started the engine that he realized Will was laughing. "What's so funny?"

"El and I have been trying to get them together for *ages* ." He laughed again. "God, I can't wait to tell her."

12. the secret: part two

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, this chapter is really short, but I just wanted a follow-up so everyone would know where Hopper and Joyce stand--for now ;)

David Harbour, if you're reading this, I love you.

After the events of That Day™, Joyce had Hopper and El over to her house with Will and Jonathan so that they could all talk about what was going on. They sat the three kids on a couch, and Joyce and Hopper pulled up chairs to face them.

“Okay,” Joyce said nervously. “So...we all know why we’re here.”

“Because you’ve been having sex,” El said.

Both adults winced.

“Yeah, well,” Hopper rumbled. “Uh...yeah.”

“Are you getting married?” Will asked.

They winced again.

“That’s...a discussion for another time,” Joyce said.

Will and El looked put out.

“Are you just sitting us down to tell us that you’re sleeping together?” Jonathan asked. “Because...we kind of already figured that out.”

“We just,” Joyce said, glancing at Hopper, “want to make sure that you’re...okay with it.”

“Do we...have a choice?”

Joyce and Hopper glanced at each other again.

“Well, yeah,” Joyce said. “I mean, if it bothers you...”

“Why were you hiding it?” Will asked.

“Because we’re still figuring things out,” Hopper said. “And we didn’t want you kids to have to figure it out with us.”

They absorbed this.

“So...what...are you?” El asked.

They glanced at each other again.

“We don’t know,” Hopper said. “We like spending time together, but we’re not, um, we’re not ready to...” He looked pleadingly at Joyce.

“We’re not ready to make anything official,” she filled in for him.
“So...we would prefer if you, um, kept this quiet.”

“Quiet?”

“If you didn’t tell other people about this,” she said. “We just...we don’t want other people knowing our business.”

El looked guilty.

“What?” Hopper asked her.

She shifted. “I already told Mike.”

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose. “Goddammit.”

“That’s okay,” Joyce said quickly. “Just...as long as his mom doesn’t find out.” If Karen knew, she would tell everyone, and she would never stop asking Joyce about it.

El and Will nodded. They knew Mike wouldn’t tell his mom.

“Okay,” Joyce said, her face clearing. “So...do you have any...questions for us?”

El raised her hand.

“Uh...yes, El?”

“Can you be my mom anyway?”

Joyce’s eyes widened. “Of, of course!”

El got up to hug her.

“For the record, I don’t want you to be my dad,” Jonathan said to Hopper.

“The feeling is mutual, kid.”

13. the test

Joyce was not in a good mood. She was more harried than usual this morning, and twice she'd tried to put her already-toasted bread into the toaster.

"Are you feeling okay?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm fine," she snapped.

Jonathan and Will raised their eyebrows at each other.

"O...kay. Are Hopper and El still coming over for dinner tonight?"

"I hope not," Joyce said irritably. "I don't want to see him tonight."

Jonathan and Will shared another look.

"Did you guys fight?" Will asked.

"No," she said. "I just. Don't want to see him right now." She picked up her keys. "Okay, I'm off to work."

"What do you think happened?" Will asked as soon as they heard her Pinto take off.

"I don't know," Jonathan said, frowning. "She said they didn't fight, but...something pretty serious must have happened."

"I'll ask El at school," Will decided.

But El didn't know anything, either.

"He said we were having dinner with you guys tonight," she said worriedly.

Will frowned. "What could be *wrong*?"

.

Everything was wrong. Everything was very, very wrong.

They'd been so careful, but Joyce's period was two weeks late, and that could only mean one thing.

Melvald's sold pregnancy tests, so it wasn't hard to ring one up for herself when no one was in the store. The real trouble was working up the nerve to do it. If that test came out positive, her entire *life* would change. She'd have another *kid*. And she just wasn't ready for that.

Not that she'd been ready for Jonathan, either, but she'd been young and had her whole life ahead of her to make things better. Now, though...well, she was...settled. She had her boys, she had a job, and she had...whatever it was she was trying to figure out with Hopper. Which further complicated the matter, because a baby would change *everything* between them. It would just be a repeat of her and Lonnie, two people who weren't ready for a kid and ended up hating each other because of it. *Or he'd just end things with her because he didn't want another kid.*

This was beyond her. She had to call in backup.

"What's this all about?" Karen asked, breezing into Melvald's.

Joyce bit her lip. "I'm...late."

Karen looked confused. "For what?"

Joyce gave her a Look.

"Oh my god!" Karen, who'd been dealing with the divorce, perked up so much it was as if nothing bad was happening in her life. "Who...?"

"It doesn't matter," Joyce said quickly. "Just...I need moral support."

"Joyce, if you don't take that pregnancy test, I'm going to *force* you to take it." Karen grabbed her hand and the pregnancy test and hauled her to the bathroom. "I'll stand watch." And she threw Joyce into the bathroom, tossing the pregnancy test kit after her.

Joyce stared down at the test dubiously. She'd taken them before, and even if she hadn't, the instructions were simple enough. It was just the doing it that was hard. Once she took this test, there was no

going back. She heaved a sigh and unbuttoned her pants.

Joyce went back to the register after she'd taken the test, carrying the test in a paper towel. Karen dutifully timed it, and when the allotted seven minutes had passed, both women peered at the test.

"Negative," Karen said. "Joyce, I think that's negative."

"I think you're right." Joyce sighed in relief, crumpling in the chair behind the register. "Oh, thank god."

At almost that precise moment, the door to Melvald's swung open, and in stormed Jim Hopper. "Joyce," he said, brow furrowed. "The kids said you were mad at me? What's going o--" He stopped short, because Joyce had held up the pregnancy test in response.

"Don't worry," she said in a raspy sort of voice. "It's negative."

Karen looked between the two. A wide smile spread across her face. "*Oh , I see !* I'll just leave you both alone, then. I'm sure you have lots to talk about." And with that, she sailed out of the general store.

Hopper had gone very white. "Joyce..."

"I'm sorry," she said, wincing. "I'm...late...and I freaked out. I'm just not...ready for more kids."

"Shit, neither am I," Hopper said, rubbing his jaw. "...I've got my hands full with one kid of my own, *and* your two--I don't think I can handle another."

"Right," she said. "...yeah. Exactly."

They blinked at each other.

"So..." he said, shifting his weight. "Are we good?"

"Yeah," Joyce said quickly. "We're good."

"Do you still not want me and El to come over for dinner?"

Joyce groaned. "I was in a bad mood--of course I want you two to

come over for dinner.”

Hopper opened his mouth to say something when Donald walked in. Joyce knocked the pregnancy test off the counter and into the wastebasket below.

“Joyce,” Donald said. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Joyce and Hopper said at the same time. Joyce smiled widely. “Nothing at all.”

Donald gave them an odd sort of smile in return. “All right.” He started for the back and then called over his shoulder, “Oh, and Joyce? Make sure you check the dates on those ClearBlue pregnancy tests--I think they’re expired.”

14. the birds and the bees

Notes for the Chapter:

Truthfully, I wasn't planning on writing this chapter, but everyone seemed so concerned about last chapter that I felt bad leaving y'all hanging! So here's a short lil resolution.

"So you're *not* pregnant?"

El froze on her way to the kitchen. Jonathan and Will were still listening to music in Will's room, but El had gotten up to get a glass of water. Joyce and Hopper were in the kitchen, talking in hushed tones.

"No, just...late."

"Did the doctor say why? I mean, that isn't normal, is it...?"

"Something to do with major life changes." A pause. "I lost some weight, too, which might be part of it."

"You eating enough?"

"Yes, I just...well. I've been a little more *active* than usual."

"*Oh . Right.*" Pause. "But you haven't been like...sick or anything...?"

"No, just. Being paranoid. That's all." She let out a small chuckle. "But maybe we should be more careful."

"Yeah. Maybe we should stop sleeping together."

"Puh, as if."

El went back to Will's room, forgetting the glass of water.

El was troubled over the next few days. Hopper noticed that

something was off, but she didn't seem to want to talk about it. It wasn't until almost a week later, when he and El were at the Byers house again, that she left Will's room to join him and Joyce in the kitchen.

"I have to tell you something."

They both looked at her expectantly.

She took a deep breath. "I think I'm pregnant."

There was a long pause. Then Hopper stood up so forcefully that he knocked his chair over. "I'm gonna kill that Wheeler kid!"

"Mike didn't do anything!" El protested.

"He got you pregnant, didn't he?!" Hopper rumbled.

"No he didn't."

Hopper hovered. "He didn't?"

Joyce furrowed her brow. "But...if Mike didn't, who...?"

"No one," El said.

Now they both looked confused.

"I slept with Will, if that's what you mean."

"What?!" Joyce yelped.

El blinked. "But you know about that. I always sleep in his room when we have sleepovers."

"I didn't know you'd been having sex!"

"We don't have sex," El said, furrowing her brow. "We just sleep."

"Then how are you pregnant?" Hopper wanted to know.

El blinked at him. "I was sick, and I slept with Will. Doesn't that make me pregnant?"

Hopper leaned heavily against the counter. “No...it does not.” He turned to Joyce. “I thought you explained this to her?”

“I told you, just the basics.” Joyce bit her lip. “El, I think it’s time we had another talk.”

When The Talk was over, El walked in a daze to Will’s room.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“My dad...and your mom...told me about...sex.”

Will winced. “Oh, *no* . That must’ve been so awkward!”

“It was,” she agreed. “It really was.”

15. merry christmas

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! So a couple things:

- 1) This is a drabble that I've already posted on my Tumblr but wanted to use as the Christmas chapter. And speaking of Christmas...
- 2) I am going to take a brief hiatus for the Christmas season; I'm working on a Christmas fic that's updated daily and I don't want to add any distractions. Feel free to request topics for future "sometimes a family is" chapters either here or at my Tumblr, jeynehopper--just make sure you specify they're for this fic!

Have a Merry Christmas, and enjoy! See y'all soon!

"So," Jonathan said as he, Will, and El climbed into his car. "Did you guys have fun?"

They exploded with chatter, telling him all about their campaign. The Christmas Eve D&D campaign had become a tradition, but this was the first year that El had been part of it. She was still new to the game, but she'd taken to it enthusiastically. It was dinner time now, though, so everyone was heading home to spend the evening with their respective families, Will and El included. El and Hopper were spending the night at the Byers house so that El could have a real family Christmas. Sure, there were no immediate plans for Joyce and Hopper to get married and make it official, but they all considered each other family just the same.

When the kids got back to the Byers house, dinner was already on the table and Christmas music was playing on the radio. El couldn't stop staring at all the sparkling decorations around the living room. Joyce admitted that she may have gone overboard with the decorating, but as she'd privately confided to Hopper, she just wanted to make sure El's first real Christmas was extra special.

"Are we going to have figgy pudding for dessert?" El asked.

Joyce seemed mildly concerned. "Oh, no...is that...okay?"

"Yes," El assured her. Then, a moment later, "What is figgy pudding?"

"It's..." But no one knew.

"Why do the people in the song want you to bring it to them?"

No one knew this, either.

After dinner, Joyce and Hopper washed dishes while the kids turned on the TV and watched all the Christmas specials. They saw Rudolph and the Grinch and Santa Claus is Coming to Town, and El loved all of them.

"Okay," Joyce said at long last. "Time for bed."

With only minimal complaining, the kids got up, changed into their pajamas, and brushed their teeth. El was sharing Will's room like she always did when she slept over, which had been happening more and more lately as their parents started spending more and more time together. She had a cot made up on the floor, next to Will's bed so that they could talk late into the night. They did, chatting about this and that. It was late when Hopper rapped on the door.

"Hey, go to sleep, or Santa's not coming."

"I thought Santa wasn't real," El whispered.

"He isn't," Will whispered back. "It's just something grownups say. Mom always leaves presents that she says are from Santa even though I've known for years. That's probably why they want us to go sleep, so we don't hear them setting up our presents."

El considered this, and not long after, she and Will dropped off to sleep.

She woke up to Will standing over her and grinning. "El, it's Christmas! Get up!"

She obeyed, following him in bewilderment to Jonathan's room. The older boy was asleep, but he smiled blearily when Will jumped on his bed and shouted that it was Christmas, he had to get up right now. "Merry Christmas, El."

"Merry Christmas, Jonathan," she responded dutifully.

"We should wake up Mom and Dad," Will said, and then flushed. "I mean...my mom and your dad."

"I don't know, Will..." Jonathan started to say, but Will was already skipping to his mom's room, El following close behind.

Will knocked loudly on the door. "It's Christmas, wake up!"

"All right, kid," Hopper said grumpily.

El started to head for the kitchen, but Will grabbed her arm. "We have to wait."

"Why?"

"Because Mom always wants to see our faces when we first see our presents under the tree. It's like...it's just what you do."

El didn't really understand it, but there were lots of things "you just did", so she accepted it. She and Will waited patiently for Joyce and Hopper to emerge from her bedroom, both of them still in pajamas. There was a lot of fussing as Joyce insisted on filming the kids, but then she couldn't figure out the camcorder, and finally Jonathan had to step in and offer to film Will and El.

El hadn't understood why Joyce wanted to see their faces before, but now she did. There were even more presents around the tree than there had been last night, and candy and toys were laid out, too. The stockings, which had been hanging over the fireplace the night before, were on the floor now, overflowing with goodies. Hopper and Joyce gave a small laugh when they saw her face.

Will ran to his stocking, tugging El with him. They pulled out candy and small toys while Jonathan recorded, laughing and comparing their gifts.

“All right,” Hopper said. “Let’s open presents!”

They took turns, holding their gifts up for the camera. Whenever it was Jonathan’s turn, he’d hand the camera over to Will.

It was nice. El got clothes and some books, including a comic book from Jonathan that looked promising. Her favorite, though, was a framed picture from Will of the whole party, arms around each other and grinning at the camera.

Later, after they’d eaten a lazy breakfast of Eggos and bacon, while Joyce was half heartedly trying to clean up the wrapping paper and ribbons, Hopper sat beside El. “So? How was your first real Christmas?”

She beamed at him. “It was...merry.”

He laughed. “Good.” He wrapped her in one of his enormous arms and pressed a kiss to her untidy mop of curls. “Merry Christmas, El.”

“Merry Christmas, Dad.”